**fingertips and collarbones**

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# fingertips and collarbones

by Anonymous

Summary

Juno Steel is slow to trust and mostly touch-averse — especially in a world where you can find your soulmate with a simple brush of skin. Somehow, Rex Glass manages to slip past his defenses anyway.

Notes

this fic was written for the 2019-2020 penumbra mini bang! special thanks to ella and kieren for their amazing artwork, which i'll embed in the fic and link in the end chapter notes when they post it.

# the beginning

Chapter Notes

content warnings for this chapter:
- canonical past character death (benzaiten steel)
- references to juno's past, which includes past drug & alcohol use as an unhealthy coping mechanism

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Benten used to be the picture of easy affection. He would grab Juno's hands with surprising strength and hold onto them with an unrivaled tenacity, no matter the time, place, or occasion. Juno could be walking to school, watching streams with Sasha and Mick, or occupying half of a twin bed after one of them had a nightmare, and Benten would be there, his fingers interlaced with Juno's own.

[image]

Sometimes, Juno would feign annoyance at this habit of his brother's. He'd say he didn't need to be mothered, or swaddled, or whatever he called it that week. Once, he even accused Benten of being clingy — but only once, because his gut twisted when hurt flashed across his brother's face.

No matter what he said, Benten never let him pull away, though, and for that, Juno was grateful. Looking back, he wished he'd said that more often.

See, touch had always been a tricky thing with Juno. It wasn't that he shunned it — not exactly, at least — but he'd never been the touchy-feely type, even at his most carefree, and then Benten died and it got a lot harder to bear. (That wasn't much of a surprise, though; so did most things in his life.)

Mick and Sasha tried, the first few months. God, they really tried. Mick held his hands (and Juno's childhood crush would've given him a chronic blush if he wasn't numb to everything right then), but those hands weren't his brother's, a mirror of his own except for the differing placements of their scars. Sasha pulled him into hugs as a matter of routine, and always held him for a good twenty seconds — ("That's when the human body starts to release oxytocin," she always claimed) — but her touch was light and gentle, nothing like the bone-

shattering, definitely-way-too-tight hugs that Benten used to give.

His friends treated him like he was fragile — and, Juno supposed, he was. He was skyrocketing out of control, chasing down drinks with strings of bad decisions, drugs he shouldn't have taken, and unhealthy relationships with people who didn't care about him. The porcelain doll treatment hadn't anchored him any closer to Mick and Sasha, though, and when Sasha left Mars for her fancy Dark Matters job, he realized that their little trio had been pulling apart for years.

(And, oh, how Juno loathed himself when he realized that he was relieved.)

Eventually, Juno got better. He wouldn't claim to be good, or even fine, but his self-destructive habits became a little less lethal, especially after he stopped drinking with Cass. (When Vicky's Vixen Valley came along, though . . . well, no one was perfect.)

He did pull into himself, though. He started wearing turtlenecks and a trenchcoat down to his knees and a thin pair of gloves that matched his skin tone almost perfectly.

He considered therapy, on-and-off. For a while, the HCPD made him see a therapist who encouraged him to talk about his brother's death, but Juno couldn't do it, not when recalling the memory was painful in itself. He clammed up at the prospect of sharing his trauma with someone he hardly knew, and eventually, he got really good at dodging his therapist's questions altogether.

Thinking back to that time of his life — yeah, all things considered, therapy should've been on the table. But he was doing okay for himself, now, wasn't he?

He quit his job at the HCPD and told himself it was time to do real good. Cut the bullshit, cut the coverups — it was just him versus all of the corruption in Hyperion City.

Well. Him and Rita.

What could he say about Rita, really? She was his secretary, sure, but she was also his best friend — she'd grown on him like the particularly pernicious sewer rabbits would cling to his pants when he tried to leave them behind.

(That is to say, he had very little say in the matter. He could only hope for them to abandon ship before he started to climb a ladder to

the surface, ‘cause their pincers were *sharp* and he wasn’t willing to risk a perfectly good pair of cargo pants every time a lady stepped out for some not-so-fresh air, jeez.)

Also? If Rita heard him make that comparison, she would be horrified. Not because Juno had indirectly compared her to a sewer rabbit — he’d actually forced her to watch a nature documentary on them one day, and now she could admire them from the other side of a screen — but because it implied he re-wore his cargo pants *after traipsing around a literal sewer in them, Mistah Steel, what the FUCK.*

Which is *also* to say that Juno loved Rita very much and appreciated their friendship immensely, even though his grumpy exterior could occlude that fact from an outside observer.

He would even tolerate Rita’s hugs, which made her the only living person on Mars with that (admittedly dubious) honor. She gave pretty good hugs, too, he had to admit — they wouldn’t make you aware of every bone in your body and how brittle they were, but they were accompanied with a deep pressure that made something finally relax in Juno’s brain.

That was another thing, right there.

Sometimes, Juno would feel overwhelmed and on-edge, like he was about to crawl out of his skin if *some inexplicable part of his surroundings* didn’t change in the next thirty seconds. Rita’s hugs helped in those moments. She’d take him somewhere dark and quiet if she could, and she’d reach her short arms all the way around him and squeeze until the feeling had at least somewhat passed.

Rita wanted him to go to therapy. Juno knew this and he *knew* it was a good idea, but he also knew he wasn’t there yet. He did take her suggestion to buy a weighted blanket, though, and *holy fucking shit* .

He didn’t use it as often as he probably should — he kept it in his closet, which was also unfortunately the place where he put things he wanted to forget about (like his old wedding dress) and the streams got a little crossed in his mind sometimes — but when he did? Talk about a lifesaver right there.

It was a hefty thing, some seventeen or eighteen pounds, and Juno adored it immediately. The only downside to its reassuring weight was its lack of portability — Juno couldn’t exactly drag it to the office everyday, much less hug it around his shoulders in a rooftop chase — but it was a healthy coping mechanism that he could actually access.

Who would've figured?

(Of course, because his name is Juno Steel and his mental health is a hellish nightmare, there have been a few times he's deprived himself of it because he *knew* it was a healthy coping mechanism and he felt like he didn't deserve it — but that was more fodder for his future therapist, he supposed.)

It was good, though. Some nights, he would pull his weighted blanket out of the closet and bring it to the couch. He'd turn on the television and surf the channels until he found something he'd watched before, and he'd let the pressure soothe him for a few hours while allowing his mind to wander. Occasionally, he'd get lost in his thoughts and ignore the movie altogether, even though he was usually the kind of lady who tried to figure out the stream's ending before it was even a quarter of the way through.

(Rita would tell anyone and everyone who would listen that it made him a terrible streams-watching partner when she wanted to watch a mystery. Rita was right, but Juno refused to acknowledge this.)

Given his own fear of relationships, perhaps it was ironic that he usually found himself watching romance flicks, but somehow, Juno found it easiest to disengage as he watched soulmates find each other over and over again. With the slightest touch — just the barest whisper of skin contact, really — they looked at each other like they'd just found the universe in each other's eyes. It was formulaic and trite and — yes, relaxing in a way.

It was hardly as if Juno had to worry about finding a soulmate. He'd quashed that hope pretty soundly before he'd even turned twenty, and his wardrobe nowadays kept him well insulated from accidental skin contact. If he were going to get into a serious relationship — and his twin fears of intimacy and vulnerability made *that* eventuality pretty unlikely — it was going to be on *his* terms, not because of some random whim of fate.

Still, he found soulmate movies entertaining. Sue him, but he liked to laugh whenever the plot dictated a stunningly improbable sprint across a crowded spaceport — seriously, how much of a fool in love did you have to be to get yourself into that kind of situation?

Chapter End Notes

i was lucky enough to receive amazing art for this chapter from ella! you can check her out on instagram (@distressedcitrus),

twitter (@milkymeteor), or tumblr (@citruscandies). the original art post can be found here on her twitter (and please consider liking and retweeting it to support her directly)!

# two betrayals

Chapter Notes

> if you read the first chapter when it was first released, flip back to the previous chapter to check out ella's amazing artwork, which is now embedded near the top! it's very Soft and Good, 10/10 recommend.
>
> thank you so much to everyone who left kind words on chapter one!!! (i may have cried a little -- but shhh, no snitching.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno Steel was having a bad day, and that was before he even met his soulmate.

He woke up thirty minutes late because the alarm on his comms failed to go off — apparently, he'd forgotten to plug it in after falling asleep on the couch. Then, as he was getting ready for the day, he discovered a hole in his favorite sweater, a stain in his trench coat that hydrogen peroxide had failed to remove overnight, and a disappointing lack of instant coffee in his cupboard.

Sure, he could've stopped for coffee on the way to work — Rita didn't exactly care if he came in late, as long as he showed up at some point and reassured her that he was alive and hadn't been kidnapped again — but Juno wasn't going to pay twelve creds for the stuff Hyperion baristas served. He drank shitty coffee, but he had standards, all right?

By the time he got to work, Juno was already in a poor mood, and the sight of Rita watching streams on her monitor when he arrived only made him grumpier. He couldn't exactly fault her, given that her workload was pretty dependent on his — when he didn't have a case, things got pretty slow around their office, unsurprisingly enough — but she was watching *Just Dragons: The Story of One Hundred Dragons but Not Any People* without him, and that was supposed to be *their* show.

"Oh, hello, Mistah Steel!" Rita exclaimed, apparently oblivious to her ongoing act of blatant treachery.

Juno scowled in response and mumbled something that could possibly pass as a greeting. It would have to be a pretty generous interpretation, but hey, maybe.

“Aww, boss, what has you in such a foul mood?” Rita swiveled around in her chair to face him. “You’ve got something on your coat there, by the way.”

“Yeah, I know,” Juno grumbled. “Bloodstains just don’t come out of fabric like they used to.”

“Well, that too, I guess? I was mostly talking about that scorch mark on your left cuff, though.”

Scorch mark? He brought his left arm closer to his face.

“Huh,” Juno remarked. “That’s new.”

Examining his sleeve, Juno could see the evidence of a particularly lucky shot from a blaster set to kill. He hadn’t noticed in the moment, but sure enough, the fabric was singed something awful; as Juno ran a finger across the affected patch, he could tell that there was going to be a sizable hole. Absurdly, it made him tear up a little bit — his coat was his barrier between himself and the outside world; it was a comforting weight and a good texture to rub between his fingers — but there was no sense in crying about it now, so he choked it down. He’d deal with that breakdown later, he thought — he could always buy a few more patches and sew it up, but it was the principle of the thing; it was his comfort object and it was damaged — but Rita noticed (of course she did) because she knew him far too well.

“Mistah Steel, you look sad. Do you want a hug?”

Her gaze bored into him and Juno let himself consider her offer for a brief moment before shaking his head. “No thanks, Rita,” he said. (“Thank you for the offer, though,” he later wished he’d added, ‘cause it came from a place of genuine love and he knew it was Rita’s attempt to reach out while simultaneously respecting his boundaries. It was just that he felt fragile inside and out, and he didn’t need a reminder of his issues with touch by receiving it when under-prepared for the experience.)

Rita looked a little disappointed — not in him, exactly, but not *not* in him, either, the rejection-sensitive part of his brain told him — and Juno shut his door to give himself room to breathe, a little quick and shuddering at first and gradually getting slower. He took off his right glove and rubbed at his left cuff, feeling the hole and the worn threads of the inner wrist — this was a popular nervous habit of his.

But that was okay, ‘cause he’d leave soon and then he could patch up his coat, assuming he had the spoons left to go to the store and get supplies and *sew* . It was — huh. Only eight forty-five in the morning? Well, okay. That was fine.

With a last wistful thought for his bed and weighted blanket, Juno plugged in his comms and forced himself to settle into his work,

knowing as he did so that he'd still be distracted for a few hours more. He liked being able to pay his bills on time, but at the same time, he half-wanted it to be the quiet kind of day where he could tell himself he was going to catch up on all the paperwork he'd been avoiding, but in reality get overwhelmed by how much of it there was and have a bit of a crisis over running his own detective agency when he obviously couldn't self-regulate.

He managed to do that quite effectively for the next few hours, especially when Rita knocked on his door a little after noon, holding his favorite mug that she usually stole because she liked it too. (There was an odd two-eyed cat wearing an unfashionable hat and holding a magnifying glass in its front paws. It was the cutest thing ever.)

The mug was full of coffee, bitter and burnt just how he liked it, because Rita was actually an angel. In fact, Juno was just about to re-categorize his day as "bad but also kind of okayish" instead of simply "bad," but that was when a weird message flashed across his comms. There was no text, just an image: a glass trophy case covered in blood and a threat that addressed him by name.

Carefully, Juno put his coffee down and tried not to retch. He wasn't a fan of blood, and seeing that image out-of-the-blue hadn't done anything to change his mind.

"What the hell?" he muttered. After a minute or two of fumbling, he managed to take a screenshot and send it to Rita. "Hey, Rita," he called through the door. "You might want to take a break from your snacks with this one."

"With *what* one — oh my goodness, Mistah Steel, that's just horrible! I ain't done with my pretzel bits and now I don't even know if I can *finish* them, seeing my boss's name written on the wall in blood like that..."

Rita trailed off and Juno heard a definite crunch that made his lips quirk up. Rita had tested her hypothesis, and apparently found that a grisly crime scene wasn't enough to deter her from her pretzel bits for too long. Then, the comms for their office rang and Juno heard Rita choke a little.

He rose from his desk in a hurry. "Rita? Are you okay?"

The intercom crackled to life.

"'M fine, boss!" Rita said, then coughed a little to clear her airway.

“My pretzel bits went down the wrong way, that’s all, and now I’ve got salmon paste on my shirt — but hold on a minute, that’s not the important part; we’re gettin’ another weird message except this one’s actually a call and its readings are all wobbly—”

While she was talking, Juno left his office, abandoning his mug on his desk. He stood by her now, arms outstretched but unsure of what he could do to help. In the background, the comms continued to ring.

Hesitantly, he patted her back in what he hoped was a soothing manner. He wasn’t good at this, okay, but at least he was *trying* .

“Boss, the comms,” Rita reminded him.

Honestly, Juno could care less about the comms, but he obediently picked up the call anyway. “What do you want?” he asked, too tired to be polite to whoever it was on the other line — especially if they were the same ones who sent that weird photo.

“Well, Juno,” Sasha Wire said. “You’re always the doting older brother, it seems.”

Juno’s mind was racing. After Sasha left for Dark Matters and the first eighteen months came and went without so much as a postcard, Juno kind of assumed that he would never hear from her again. Now, she’d called to warn him about some creepy death mask, forcibly assign him a case, and inform him that an Dark Matters agent was on his way -- which, like, fuck that. Juno was a competent detective; he didn’t need a guy named after a dinosaur who supposedly specialized in the occult to babysit him while he solved Croesus Kanagawa’s murder.

He was already wearing his coat, which just left him scrambling to find his keys, the right laser cartridges for his blaster, and an escape route. It was probably safe to assume that the front door had been compromised, so he’d have to rely upon the fire escape outside his office window, as rickety and frail as it was. Given his fear of heights, his willingness to use it outside of an actual emergency situation said a lot about the measures he was willing to take to avoid Rex Glass — but fate, it seemed, had other plans.

The agent in question knocked on his door — his office door, not the external one, which meant Rita had already let Rex inside. Fuck. Juno meant to ask Rita to stall him for as long as possible and then act all surprised when Juno wasn’t in his office, but he guessed he forgot to let her in on his plan.

“Hello? Detective Steel, are you in there?”

“Damn,” Juno whispered, and threw open the window. Quickly, he swung a leg over the side and ducked out the frame, then bit back a curse as he realized how far he really was from the ground. The agent’s voice was still muffled by the door for now, but how long until Juno was saddled with its presence for the duration of the case?

Oh. Oh, no. While Juno was getting lost in his anxious thoughts, Rita had *opened the door* .

This was her second betrayal in a single day, Juno thought, and then his thoughts stopped in their tracks altogether. Warmth rose in his cheeks, and Juno was suddenly uncomfortably aware that he was effectively straddling his window.

“Ah, Detective Steel,” Agent Glass said. “How lovely to meet you at… last.” He paused, a gloved finger coming up to rest on his bottom lip in a gesture that radiated innocent curiosity. ”Detective, are you trying to crawl out that window?”

Juno replied on auto-pilot. “I’d say I was succeeding,” he said, dumbstruck. He was sure his eyes were wide, and cursed himself for being so easy to read. He shook his head, as if that could reboot his brain into functioning. *Come on, Steel — get it together. No flirty banter for you, even if you're using it as a defense mechanism.*

Glass’s lips curved into an amused smile, and wow, those *teeth* . Like a fox’s, they were sharp and pointed, and his eyes possessed a similar sly intelligence. Juno met his gaze and he felt *known* , like this stranger could look at him and see straight to the core of his essence, knocking down whatever barriers he met on the way.

“Well, I heard they do things differently on Mars, but I must admit this is a surprise!” He laughed, and Juno’s head finally cleared. There was something off about that laugh — something false, something performative. “You’ll have to show me your customs, Detective. Is there room in that window for two?”

Oh, so that was how it was, huh? He knew the effect he was having on Juno — he’d quite effectively leveraged it against Rita earlier — and Juno was determined to not let a pretty face get in the way of solving a murder. That didn’t stop him from losing his composure at Glass’s flirting, though.

“I, uh — you could see for yourself, if you wanted,” Juno stammered,

then immediately regretted it. What had happened to keeping it professional? He felt flustered at how quickly this was quickly spiraling out of his control. “I’m not one for etiquette, though — if you’re here to learn about Martian customs, you picked the wrong lady. I learned everything I know from the sewer rabbits.”

Glass laughed again, and this time, there were no false undertones. “Oh, Detective Steel,” he said. “This is going to be a wonderful partnership, don’t you think?”

Chapter End Notes

> this second chapter featured art by the lovely kieren! check them out on tumblr (@esiako & @kieren-sz) or twitter (@kieren_sz). their art was originally posted here on tumblr and here on twitter. consider liking and reblogging/retweeting it to support the artist directly!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!